DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 168 455 HE 011 189

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TITLE A Value-Centered Approach to the Western Tradition.
PUB DATE 28 Oct 78
NOTE 17p.; Paper prepared for the Association for General and Liberal Studies (Des Moines, Iowa, October 28, 1978)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Instruction; Course Evaluation; *Course Objectives; Ethical Instruction; *General Education; Higher Education; *Humanistic Education; Humanities; *Moral Development; Social Attitudes; *Values; *Western Civilization
IDENTIFIERS Baker University KS

ABSTRACT

A general education course for sophomores at Baker University entitled "Shaping of Western Thought" is described. The goals of the university's general education program are enumerated and the ways in which this course serves those purposes are discussed. Focus in the course is on both personal and social values. Three values--love, peace, and freedom--are examined. Alternative definitions of these ideas, as they have emerged from particular historical contexts, and their manifold implications for individuals and groups are considered. The contexts in question are great cities in the Western tradition, such as Athens, Rome, Paris, London, and New York. It is hoped that students will come to appreciate the interrelationships between the ideas and attitudes that individuals and groups cherish and the natural and social environments in which they live and work. A brief evaluation of student response to the course is also provided. (Author/LBH)

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ED168455

A Value-Centered Approach to the Western Tradition"

A paper prepared for the
Association for General and Liberal Studies
Des Moines, Iowa - October 28, 1979
by John C. English

The subject of this paper is an inter-disciplinary, team-taught course entitled the "Shaping of Western Thought." This two semester course is a part of the general education program sponsored by Baker University. It is required of all sophomores enrolled in the college.

To help you understand and appreciate the distinctive characteristics of this course, I propose to do four things in this paper:

First, to describe briefly the University in which it is taught:

Second, to enumerate the goals of the general education program, of which it is a part:

Third, to list the goals of the Shaping of Western Thought and to show how they are related to the goals of general education;

And finally, to notice the degree of success which we have enjoyed thus far.

I.

Since the establishment of a successful program depends in part

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upon the resources of the institution which sponsors it, let me begin with a brief description of Baker University. Baker is an independent liberal arts college related to the United Methodist Church. Chartered by the territorial legislature in 1858, Baker is the oldest institution of higher education in what is now the state of Kansas. The main campus is located in Baldwin, a small town fifteen miles south of Lawrence and forty-five miles southwest of Kansas City. The college confers several undergraduate degrees, namely, the Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Science, Bachelor of Music Education and Bachelor of Allied Health Sciences. In cooperation with Southern Methodist University, Baker offers a Master of Liberal Arts degree on the campus of the Barstow School in Kansas City, Missouri. During the current semester, 885 men and women are enrolled in the undergraduate programs and 114 individuals are enrolled in the M. L. A. program. The faculty, counting both full-time and part-time teachers, consists of 80 persons.

II.

Each undergraduate is expected to participate in the University's

general education program. At this point, let me enumerate the goals of this program, of which the Shaping of Western Thought is a part. I am interpreting documents produced by the Baker faculty and its committees; it is only fair to say that some of my colleagues would phrase matters somewhat differently.

As we try to define the goals of general education, we often use phrases such as personal maturity, individual autonomy or the realization of human potentialities. By themselves these phrases tell us relatively little. Perhaps it would be more useful to list what we expect the liberal arts graduate to know, the skills which we hope he has developed and the attitudes which are characteristic of him. Here is such a list, which I offer without comment:

a. Ability to use the English language fluently, both to read with pleasure and understanding and to write clearly and cogently;

b. Ability to find reliable information, identify fallacious assertions, construct logical arguments and integrate and organize knowledge;

c. Self-knowledge, both the physical charcteristics of the hu-

man body, the nature of human personality, and the ways in which it may be expressed;

d. Knowledge of the social organism of which he is a part, the ways in which it is organized, functions and develops over the course of time and, in particular, means whereby men and women, either through individual or concerted action, can modify the system or at least oblige it to be more responsive to their needs and desires;

e. Awareness of the goals and the presuppositions of the natural sciences, their potentialities and their limitations; of the processes whereby they arrive at conclusions; and of the ways in which science and technology affect the destinies of men and nations;

f. Acquaintance with the theory of art, both in its technical, historical and aesthetic aspects, and the ability to appreciate one or more of the fine arts;

g. The capacity to use his leisure constructively and to learn continuously throughout his life;

h. Preparation for the world of work, in that one is developing, by means of general education, skills and attitudes which will enhance

his performance and his satisfaction in whatever job he takes.

In my judgment, general education and value education overlap, although they are not identical. Therefore, among the goals of general education, I would give pride of place to the consideration of moral values. The ramifications of this goal are many and far-reaching; I will touch upon three of them.

a. The staff of the general education program, in concert with the administrative officers and the balance of the faculty, strives to impart to students certain values to which it is committed. In a democratic and pluralistic society such as ours, we tend to shy away from the explicit statement of this goal, but it is implicit in the expectations which we have and in the requirements which we impose.

Let me give a short but not exhaustive list of these institutional values. It includes:

i. The conviction that the search for knowledge and the dissemination of it are worthwhile endeavors;

ii. Honesty: We condone neither the "cooking" of research data,

the plagiarism of papers nor cheating on exminations;

iii. freedom of expression;

iv. fairness and equity in making decisions and putting them into practice;

v. respect for persons: This umbrella-like category comprises security of life and property; courtesy toward others; tolerance of uncommon life-styles and unpopular ideas; and opposition to discrimination, whether on grounds of sex, race, national origin, social class or religion.

b. Now we go on to a further aspect of the matter under consideration. General education asks and enables students to reflect upon questions of value. This can entail:

i. Establishing criteria in terms of which the morality of an act can be judged;

ii. Identifying the personal values which one brings to college and the values of his peers and of society as a whole;

iii. Testing these values for their adequacy and considering alternate possibilities;

iv. Identifying and reflecting upon the value assumptions and implications of one's major or particular discipline;

v. In concert with one's fellows, searching for shared values which can form the basis of common action;

vi. And all of these activities by way of helping the individual to devise for himself a personal philosophy of life.

c. In my judgment, encouraging students to become aware of and to reflect upon their values is only a part of the job. We also need to provide practice in relating general principles to concrete situations. If we leave it to students to work out these relationships for themselves, many of them either can't or don't, and much of the effort put into the consideration of values is lost.

Let me illustrate what I mean: Suppose we say that love of neighbor is a significant value. How is this value to be expressed? Do courtesy toward strangers and material help for the poor suffice or does this value also entail efforts to change the institutions of society? If the latter is involved, what methods of social change are both morally licit and politically effective? Or let us consider this

value from another angle. I have received a notice from my draft board: "Greetings . . . ." What should I do? Is it more loving to refuse induction into the army, thus avoiding the possibility that I might have to shoot a "neighbor," or to report for military service, thus helping, perhaps, to prevent the invasion of my country, an invasion in which my "neighbor" runs the risk of being killed? Does the date on my draft notice make any difference? Is 1942, the war against Hitler, different from 1950, the Korean War, or 1969, the war in Indo-China?

In concluding this section, let me outline briefly the program in general education which the Baker faculty has devised as a means of attaining the various goals which I have discussed. This program consists of three parts. Each students must satisfy an English proficiency requirement, either by examination or by making a "C" in a three-hour composition course. Then he must complete a distribution requirement by taking twenty-one hours of work chosen from the six groups into which the curriculum is divided. These groups are literature; philosophy and religion; the fine arts; the physical sciences and

mathematics; the biological sciences and psychology; and history and society. Some of the courses in these groups are designed specifically for general education purposes and others are regular departmental offerings. Finally, each student must take two inter-disciplinary courses, the sophomore-level course on the Shaping of Western Thought, to which this paper refers, and a senior-level course on society, technology and values. The former of these courses carries six hours of credit and the latter three.

III.

Now we turn from the goals of general education, as I understand them, to the third section of this paper. The question here is: What are the goals of Baker's course on the Shaping of Western Thought and how does it serve the purposes of general education?

By way of background, let me say a little about the mechanics of the course. The staff is composed of eleven persons. These individuals come from eight different disciplines, English, French, German, history, philosophy, political science, religion and sociology. During the current

semester 240 students are enrolled in the course, the largest course in the college. Shaping of Western Thought is scheduled to meet three times a week for fifty minutes at a stretch. Approximately one-third of this time is devoted to illustrated lectures delivered by the course Director. The other two-thirds is given over to section meetings led by the other members of the staff. In addition, from time to time we schedule "special events" so-called. These are usually movies related to the work of the course, although they have included selections from Aristophanes' plays performed by the local honor society in theater and an address on Reinhold Niebuhr by the President of the University.

Now we pass on to the particular goals of Shaping of Western Thought. They are three in number.

a. First and foremost, the course focuses upon values, both personal and social. We have chosen for examination three values which are fundamental to the Western tradition. These values are, first, love; second, peace; and third, freedom. We want to consider the alternate definitions of these terms, as they have emerged in the course of time, and their manifold implications for individuals and

groups.

We ask students to read and to discuss in their section meetings works by distinguished authors who have had important things to say about these ideas. Wherever possible, we ask that they read entire works, not bits and pieces from them. Examples of the materials read during the first semester include Sophocles, Antigone and Plato's dialogues, the Symposium and the Death of Socrates; Cicero, On Friendship and Paul's letter to the Romans; Andreas Capellanus, The Art of Courtly Love and selections from Thomas Aquinas. Last year's syllabus for the second semester included, among other things, Diderot, Supplement to Bougainville's 'Voyage' and Rousseau, The Social Contract; J. S. Mill, On Liberty and Shaw's play, Major Barbara; sermons by Paul Tillich and Arthur Miller's The Crucible.

b. The second goal of Shaping of Western Thought is this: We want students to appreciate the inter-relationships between the ideas and attitudes which individuals and groups cherish and the natural and social environments in which they live and work. Obviously these relationships are many and complex. At the very least an individual's

ideas reflect the home, the neighborhood and the polity in which he grows up. On the other hand, human beings, by acting upon their ideas, can modify the natural and social environments in which they live.

In order to get at this goal, we consider the ideas of love, peace and freedom in the contexts which great centers of Western culture provide. This enables us to ask the question, why does culture flourish particularly in urban environments? Furthermore, we hope that the experiences of urban men in the past can illumine the problems which we as city dwellers must confront today. The cities which we study are these: During the first semester, Athens in the fifth and early fourth centuries B.C.; Rome during the first century B.C. and the first century A.D.; and Paris during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. During the second semester we study the Paris of the eighteenth century, London during the nineteenth and New York during the first half of the twentieth century.

Earlier I mentioned that approximately one-third of the class time is set aside for lectures. These lectures are used primarily to establish the contexts in which certain ideas appear and, more particularly,

to draw to students' attention the inter-relationships between ideas and environment. Recently, for instance, we have been studying the city of Rome. The students were asked to read selections from Epictetus. In a lecture I tried to show that the havoc of civil war and the breakdown of traditional morality predisposed the Roman elite to accept the teachings of the Stoics.

c. As do faculty members teaching other courses in the general education program, the staff in Shaping of Western Thought encourages students to develop their writing skills. This is the third goal of the course. To this end, essay as well as multiple choice questions appear on every examination. More to the point, each semester students are required to write two reflective papers, as we call them, of approximately 750 words apiece. Students can write a critique of an idea which appears in the assigned readings or they can take a contemporary problem in which they are interested and use the readings in order to resolve it. Several members of the staff hold individual conferences with the students in their sections, either before or after the students write these papers. If the conferences are held before

the papers are handed in, their purpose is to help students clarify their ideas and formulate their hypotheses. If the conferences are held afterwards, they are used to point out the strengths and weaknesses of the work which the students have submitted.

IV.

This is the second year that Shaping of Western Thought has been offered. In conclusion let me review briefly the degree of success which we have enjoyed thus far. Within the course we carry on a continuing process of evaluation by means of student questionnaires, self-evaluations on the part of the staff and regular conferences between staff members and the course Director. In addition, this fall the Board of Trustees, the administration, the faculty and the body of returning students were asked to rate the general education program as a whole and Shaping of Western Thought in particular. On the basis of these kinds of evidence, we can draw certain tentative conclusions. By overwhelming majorities the Board, the administration and the faculty expressed their satisfaction with the course. Student response is

more difficult to interpret. Eighty-seven percent of the sophomores, juniors and seniors responding rated the general education program as satisfactory or very good; fifty-five percent gave the Shaping of Western Thought one or the other of these ratings. Since a large number of these students have never taken the course, their reactions must be treated with caution. I have the impression, based upon the evaluations completed by students who have completed the Shaping of Western Thought, that their response to the course is still more positive than this figure would suggest.

Addendum

Since this paper was completed, further information concerning student responses to SWT has become available. With regard to the survey taken in September, 1978, to which the preceding paragraph refers, a breakdown of the respondents by classes shows that sixty-seven percent of the sophomores rated the Shaping of Western Thought as satisfactory or very good. These are the students who are currently enrolled in the course.

As stated earlier, the primary, although no the only, purpose of SWT is to encourage students to reflect upon the ethical values which they bring to college. The success of the course is to be judged in light of this objective. We have evidence that SWT is meeting its goal. Each semester the students in the course are asked to complete two carefully contrived evaluation forms. At the conclusion of the fall semester, 1978, sixty-five percent of the students responding reported that the course had led them to think about the values which they hold.